

Folic Acid for Healthy Babies

The National Folic Acid Campaign



The CDC, the March of Dimes, and the National Council on Folic Acid have organized the National Folic Acid Campaign to promote the use of folic acid to prevent the serious birth defects spina bifida and anencephaly. The goal of the campaign is to educate all women who could possibly become pregnant to consume 400 micrograms (400 mcg) of synthetic folic acid daily from vitamin supplements and/or fortified foods in addition to eating food folate in a healthful diet.

How does the campaign educate these audiences? CDC used extensive health communications research to develop the messages and materials for the campaign. The materials as well as the implementation plan are provided to any person or organization wishing to become a partner by participating in the campaign. Channels and strategies for distributing those materials were developed with input from women and community stakeholders. Campaign partners are able to reprint any materials using their own logo and name. The messages were tested and reactions from the target audiences were very positive. The messages are available as television, radio, and print PSAs, as well as posters and brochures for health care provider offices and other locations.

Who does the campaign target? The campaign targets all women of reproductive age, the health care professionals who serve these women, and community advocacy groups. Among women of reproductive age, research has identified two primary target groups for the initial campaign: women planning a pregnancy (labeled “contemplators”) and those not planning a pregnancy (labeled “non-contemplators”).

The “**contemplators**” generally fall in the 18-35 year old range and are planning a pregnancy sometime in the next year or so. They would seriously consider behavior changes that would improve pregnancy outcomes. The biggest barrier for these women appears to be lack of knowledge; they do not know when folic acid is needed to be effective. Therefore, education about the importance of folic acid prior to conception and in the first few months is the objective. The timing of taking folic acid is emphasized in the message to contemplators. As a group, Hispanic women reported more openness than other groups to the possibility of becoming pregnant, even if they are not actively planning pregnancy at the time. Because Hispanics are at increased risk for spina bifida and anencephaly, a concurrent campaign for Hispanic women uses materials developed specially for that group, and takes the contemplators target group strategy.

The pregnancy “**non-contemplators**” are more difficult to reach. These young women are usually 18-24 years of age and are not planning to become pregnant. Because non-contemplators do not intend to become pregnant, they are more resistant than contemplators to behaviors that improve pregnancy outcomes. However, the average age for pregnancy is 21, and 50% of all pregnancies are unplanned. Women in this group understand that while they are not planning a pregnancy, they are biologically capable.

Therefore, it is important to raise their awareness to take multivitamins now in order to reduce the risk for some serious birth defects in the future. The tone of messages to this group are “hip”, youthful, energetic, and address some of the issues that make this message personal for them. The messages for non-contemplators emphasize that your body is ready for pregnancy even if you’re not planning a pregnancy now.

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How does the campaign reach a national audience? The National Council on Folic Acid (NCFA) is a coalition of diverse organizations that interact with national consumer, professional, and multi cultural constituencies and are committed to a campaign to promote folic acid to prevent birth defects. Each member organization of NCFA contributes to the campaign in a manner that will maximize their distribution resources and best educate their constituents. NCFA has also recruited additional partners from the fields of public health, education, and business to help implement and evaluate the campaign. Leadership and staff for NCFA is being provided by the National March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation.

The CDC has published a comprehensive guide for partners and other interested persons entitled **Preventing Neural Tube Birth Defects: a Prevention Model and Resource Guide** to provide user friendly technical assistance for our partners, local organizations, health departments, and community members to conduct local folic acid education campaigns that will compliment the national effort. The resource guide is available to all who request it.

CDC, the March of Dimes, and the National Council on Folic Acid provide materials and training to all partners who wish to help in the campaign. Materials include television, radio, and print PSAs, media kits, posters and brochures. These campaign materials can be used to plan new state and local campaigns or to integrate into current public health efforts. Materials from CDC can be ordered by calling toll-free at 1-888-232-5929 or by going to the online order form at <http://www2.cdc.gov/ncbddd/faorder>. The March of Dimes Resource Center can be reached by calling toll-free 1-888-MODIMES (888-663-4637) or by going to the online order form at <http://www.modimes.org>.



To read more about the National Folic Acid Campaign including examples of state and local efforts, awards, free materials, and what's new, please visit our website at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/folicacid/folcamp.htm> .